



Review article

Covenant theology and its political dimensions

Moots, G.A. 2010. *Politics reformed: the Anglo-American legacy of covenant theology*. Colombia: University of Missouri Press. 240 p. Price: \$38,00. ISBN: 978-0-8262-1885-8.

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Glenn Moots, the author of *Politics reformed: the Anglo-American legacy of covenant theology*, provides an informative and refreshing view of the political theory of the covenant, hereby also adequately confirming the relevance of covenantal thinking for political theory (and theology). The author accomplishes his aim of “telling the story of a very powerful political and religious idea, namely that of making a covenant” (p. xi). A reconsideration of the implications of covenantal thought for political theory is long overdue and *Politics reformed* presents not only a good overview of covenantal thinking, but also makes it real and relevant for modern political and theological theory. *Politics reformed* gives an encompassing view of scholarship on the political dimension of the covenant, further enriching covenantal thought by providing new commentaries on past works and presenting interesting insights. *Politics reformed* also addresses substantial yet complex issues related to covenantal thought, such as: “How does one reconcile conditional and unconditional covenants?”; “What is the relationship between the individual covenant of salvation in Christ and the corporate covenant?”; and “The relationship between the political effect of Christian covenantalism and the question as to where do we find the Promised Land, the Kingdom of God?” (p. 29-30). This book brings home the inextricable connection between purely theological concepts (and their relevance to the

individual believer) and political theory (and its relevance to the society of believers).

Politics reformed is divided into three main parts: the first part brings forth the importance and relevance of public theology; the second part is comprised of contributions towards covenantal political theory emanating from the Reformation and early American history; and the third part gives some contemporary perspectives and lessons for religion and politics today.

In the first part, the author informs the reader of some foundational insights, before embarking on a more detailed study on the “political covenant” in the subsequent parts. In this regard, part one briefly discusses issues such as the relationship between religion and politics; a revisiting of the particular role of reformed political theology; and the failure of radical political secularism (p. 9). Here the author further orientates the reader against the background of “Christianity as also having *existential* significance”, for this ensures that the demands of the Christian faith will not come into conflict with the demands of the civil polity. The author comments that politics is a practical science, having *existential* and *eschatological* significance. In this regard, “robbing Christianity of its existential (and *eschatological*) imperatives would disable it as a potential competitor to political philosophies” (p. 12). The author’s comment that the biblical virtues of faith, hope and love also “invite a *relationship* with the Creator” is refreshing as well as powerful. To paraphrase: “These biblical virtues are *relational* virtues. They enhance the existential dimension of biblical religion and give force to its eschaton” (p. 16). Implied here is that *it is through the covenant that this is realised*. This is a substantial insight into theology and its consequent political implications. Three main historical periods are then described, emphasising the period of the Reformation (in contrast to the Classical period and Natural Theology, modern Atheism, and Gnosticism), and more specifically Calvin’s theology as signifying the revival of covenant theology. It is in such a theology that the existential (and eschatological) aspect of Christian theology becomes magnified (p. 17). The author ends this section by stating that:

Because of its emphasis on revealed theology, human conscience, and lateral and vertical relationships ... covenanting is a political theology par excellence. It is the most intensely ethical and political expression of biblical religion. (p. 21.)

This provides a good orientation before embarking specifically on covenantal thinking from a biblical point of view, where the author

investigates “the origin of covenant, the Hebrew Chronology, and the Christian Interpretation”.

The second part begins with a chapter on the covenantal ideas of John Calvin and Heinrich Bullinger, two prominent authors within the early period of the Reformation. In this regard, says the author, reformed theology’s return to the Old Testament lead to an emphasis on biblical covenants as leitmotif of theology and biblical interpretation (p. 33). The relevance of predestination, divine sovereignty and soteriology for political thinking against the background of covenantal thought is also emphasised. The author confirms that, unlike Calvin who rooted covenants of salvation in the unknowable will of God, Bullinger postulated a more accessible approach by placing covenanting in the context of human covenants and agreements, and in the words of the author:

The point here was not to argue that Bullinger thought covenants were an agreement between equals or to make the biblical covenants akin to human contracts, but rather to stress the accommodation of God. The unknowable mystery in Calvin is why God chose to save one person rather than another; the unknowable mystery in Bullinger is the role of God’s will in predestination. (p. 46.)

This certainly provides a different approach to the relevance of Christian political activity. It is in this regard that the author indicates in the next chapter of part 2 how one understands how the particulars of covenant salvation informs political questions central to the sixteenth century and the centuries that follow. Included in this is the role of church discipline, church-state relations, resistance against tyranny, political legitimacy, popular approval of magistrates, and the importance of the individual conscience. This section also confirms and furthers the contributions of modern authors, especially those of J. Wayne Baker and Charles S. McCoy regarding Bullinger’s unique biblical interpretation of covenantal theology. Following on this is an informative overview of the “legacies of Geneva and Zurich in England and Scotland”. Here the author also brings to light the contributions made by prominent Scottish Puritan authors such as Samuel Rutherford, the covenantal foundations in Scottish pre-eighteenth century history and the Westminster Assembly, the articulation of a “covenant of works” that extended to all persons, as well as the deepening theological inquiry into preparation and conscience as the means of explaining the work of the Holy Spirit in redemption and man’s part in that redemption. Both of these innovations (ac-

cording to the author), energised the joining of church and state and the national corporate covenant.

Reformed Protestants began moving away from what they condemned as inane questions and moving toward 'practical theology', which was intended to build a practical bridge between the covenants and both moral duty and experiential salvation. (p. 81.)

This section is followed by a chapter on the prominent role of covenant theology and politics in early American history, a section which also serves as the last section of *Politics reformed*'s summary of the historical theory and practice of reformed political theology over three centuries.

The author then uses a separate chapter titled "Natural Law and Natural Right in Reformed Political Theology". Here much emphasis is placed on the views of John Calvin, Christopher Goodman, John Knox, Phillipe du Plessis Mornay and Samuel Rutherford. The author mentions that the reformed theologians required some kind of general revelation to inform politics "for they could not rely on one source alone (Scripture) when additional sources (from reason or nature) could appeal to a populace of both believing and unbelieving persons" (p. 118-119). The author makes an important observation:

Reformers agreed with their medieval predecessors on man's knowledge of the natural law. Where they disagreed was in the natural ability to obey it. Conscience, according to Calvin, is more a function of the intellect than of the will. That is, it was more readily known than obeyed. (p. 121.)

Although scholarship on "natural law and the Reformation" is established, *Politics reformed* manages to provide informative observations on natural law thinking by mainly prominent sixteenth-century reformed theologians (with Samuel Rutherford added as a seventeenth-century reformed theologian). However, this chapter is isolated when one bears in mind the emphasis and general pattern of the book as reflective of covenantal thinking. One misses some explanation as to the relationship between natural law theory and covenantal political thought from a biblical point of view. Also, the author leaves the discussion on the reformed theological and political view on natural law against the background of the First Table (a rather neglected topic in modern reformed political scholarship) open for further investigation. The last chapter of part 2 gives a good overview of the findings in this part of *Politics reformed*. The author gives a clear orientation as to the relationship between political covenantal

thought and the Christian community. What particularly drew my attention (although there is more to this chapter) is the mention of the much-asked question: “What is the relationship between the individual covenant of salvation in Christ and the corporate covenant?” This reminds one of John Coffey’s similar concern in his research on the Scottish Puritan Samuel Rutherford (see John Coffey. 1997. *Politics, religion and the British revolutions: the mind of Samuel Rutherford*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p. 165-166). Coffey states:

Whilst it is often asserted that covenant theology inspired the idea of a national covenant, the precise relationship between the two is usually left vague. The widespread popularity of federal-theology obviously made it natural to think in terms of covenant relationships with God, but how did theologians move from the theological idea of covenant to the political concept? How did they move from the covenant of grace, which was made only with the elect, to the national covenant, which was made with a whole people, both elect and reprobate?

In this regard the author of *Politics reformed* elaborates on this.

Reformed Protestantism understood that the biblical narrative is not a story of puppets or of push-pull cause-and-effect. It is a story of redemption, and redemption follows failure. The Bible’s patriarchs and leaders proved capable of great deceits and betrayals. Christ’s parables tell of stony ground, unfaithful servants, prodigal sons, and barren fig trees. This recounting of failures enabled reformers to talk about the covenant of salvation as both bilateral and unilateral at the same time. God defined terms and in some mysterious way enabled believers to persevere to the end, but he also called on them to heed and hearken to terms, leaving persons without excuse. The covenant became a perfect tool for politics. The terms of salvation appeared almost contractual. Why should not the order, justice, and rewards of the civil magistrate work in much the same way? The covenant made divine attributes accessible and applicable, resembling the power of civil authorities. God established *order* at creation, the same kind of order established by civil law. God’s *justice* is manifest from the Fall until Judgment Day, and civil magistrates execute justice as well. God’s *rewards* are bestowed graciously and powerfully, but not without terms of performance. If divine authority could be fit to conditional terms of rewards and punishments, the civil magistrate could have no better model. Liberty and order were thus complementary. (p. 131.)

Part 3, the final part of *Politics reformed*, places the emphasis on three modern scholars of political theory who have studied prospects of covenants for *contemporary* politics, namely Eric Voegelin (who argues that the covenant is an important but precarious political symbol), Daniel Elazar (who argues for the continuing relevance of political covenanting), and David Novak (who has taken the most exclusive view of covenanting). The author gives a brief yet informative exposition on the covenantal views of the above authors, and compares their views with one another.

Here the reader must be prepared to take note of diverse views on the covenant, and one gets the idea that the author explains the covenantal views of the said scholars as they are part of the view of modern mainstream scholars who have written on the question at any length. The author comes to the conclusion that whereas Elazar addresses the covenant as a potentially universally accessible political device, a method for legal institution and political conceptualisation, Novak confines the covenant strictly to the biblical covenants. On the other hand, Novak asks about the place of a biblical covenant in a larger political society that will not, or cannot, enter a covenant (p. 151). This section definitely lures further scholarship on the issue.

In the last chapter of *Politics reformed*, titled “Lessons for religion and politics today”, an understanding of covenantal thought for today is sought. It is important for the author that the covenant be preserved within communities, and that this be consistent with the prescription of a modern covenanted theorist such as David Novak (but also, says the author, with an older one such as Johannes Althusius) (p. 158). Here an argument is made for the protection of individual and autonomous entities against the background of social covenanting and a distinction is made between the concepts *secularity* and *secularism*. The author explains that secularity requires not only that religious communities not co-opt the larger social contract, but also that the social contract not discourage religious expression (p. 158). Secularism, by contrast, (according to the author), is an ideology that seeks to co-opt real communities – “civil society under secularism attempts to replace the sacred realm by becoming the sacred realm itself” (p. 159). Then, referring to David Novak, the author states:

When religious communities are respected and intact, there is hope for true and neutral secularity because these communities have a religious need for that public space. Every religious community desires to preserve public space for themselves, but

realizes that this cannot be to the exclusion of others. This suggests a federal, and therefore covenantal, solution to a human problem. This means decentralizing, dispersing and moderating authority. (p. 159.)

Referring to David Novak, the author states that secularity respects biblical revelation, but limits its application in public norms – secularity can accommodate and respect covenanted communities whilst secularism cannot. The author then concludes with a section titled, “The importance of the covenantal ethos”. Here it is difficult to reconcile the preceding proposals on secularity and secularism against the background of social covenanting, and what the author refers to in the last section, namely “the biblical tradition which is marked by its emphasis on both *love* and *covenanting* and on the relationship between the two”. The author ends by referring to the “model of love which is divine love and covenant love begins with the love of God rather than the love of the self” (p. 161). In this regard, the text is vague and consequently invites more explanation. However, the author does leave a person thinking about the covenantal implications and expectations in a highly diverse contemporary society. Here as well the author succeeds in encouraging further discussion on the issue.

Glenn Moots’ *Politics reformed* succeeds in confronting modern-day political theorists (religious and other) with the unique contributions of covenantal thought. The book adds to the further understanding of such thought (both for the theologian and the pastor, as well as the political theorist), enriches the inextricable relationship between theology and politics, practice and theory, and also serves as a catalyst towards further discussion on political-covenantal thought, especially for a contemporary society.

